

**TESTIMONY BY
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NATIONAL COMMANDER
AMERICAN EX-PRISONERS OF WAR**

**BEFORE THE
JOINT HEARING OF THE COMMITTEES
ON
VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. SENATE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

MARCH 20, 2003

Accompanied by
PNC Zack Roberts
Legislative Chairman

Dr. Charles A. Stenger
Legislative Consultant
&
Leslie H. Jackson
Executive Director

CHAIRMAN SPECTER, CHAIRMAN SMITH, RANKING MEMBER GRAHAM, RANKING MEMBER EVANS, DISTINGUISHED MEMBERS OF THE SENATE AND HOUSE VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEES AND GUESTS.

YOUR INVITATION TO APPEAR BEFORE YOU TODAY TO PRESENT THE CONCERNS OF THE AMERICAN EX-PRISONERS OF WAR IS, AS ALWAYS, SINCERELY AND DEEPLY APPRECIATED.

MY TESTIMONY TODAY WILL BE VERY BRIEF. THIS MAY BE THE LAST TIME THE AMERICAN EX-PRISONERS OF WAR WILL TESTIFY BEFORE THIS JOINT SESSION.

WHY? YOU LISTEN TO US POLITELY: YOU CALL US "HEROES". (WE THINK OF OURSELVES SIMPLY AS SURVIVORS.) YOU COMMEND US FOR PAST SACRIFICES FOR OUR COUNTRY. YOU ACKNOWLEDGE THE LONG TERM HEALTH CONSEQUENCES - BUT SINCE 1988 YOU HAVE NOT ACTED TO ESTABLISH ADDITIONAL POW PRESUMPTIVES! YOU HAVE NOT DONE SO EVEN THOUGH THE EVIDENCE IS BEYOND QUESTION - AND THE POW ADVISORY COMMITTEE WHICH YOU ESTABLISHED IN 1981 HAS UNANIMOUSLY AND REPEATEDLY RECOMMENDED FAVORABLE ACTION. THAT COMMITTEE WENT ON RECORD STATING IT IS PATENTLY UNFAIR TO HOLD ONE AT-RISK VETERAN GROUP TO A DIFFERENT AND HIGHER STANDARD OF PROOF. IT RECOMMENDED THAT ALL SUCH GROUPS BE HELD TO THE SAME STANDARD.

WE NOTE THAT THE PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY OF THE VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE AND SENATE IS TO IDENTIFY PROBLEMS OF VETERANS DIRECTLY ATTRIBUTABLE TO THEIR MILITARY EXPERIENCE AND TO TAKE LEADERSHIP IN CONGRESS FOR APPROPRIATE LEGISLATIVE ACTION. WE ARE DEEPLY CONCERNED WITH THE FAILURE OF THE CONGRESSIONAL COMMITTEES TO DO SO.

IN THIS RESPECT WE NOTE THAT VERY FEW MEMBERS OF THE HOUSE VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE, INCLUDING THE CHAIRMAN, HAVE EVEN SIGNED ON AS COSPONSORS OF A BILL INTRODUCED BY CONGRESSMAN BILIRAKIS MANY MONTHS AGO TO ADD FIVE PRESUMPTIVES AND CORRECT OTHER INEQUITIES. SINCE ALL MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ARE AWARE OF THE URGENCY AS WELL AS THE JUSTIFICATION, SUCH FAILURE TO SUPPORT THIS LEGISLATION SO THAT IT COMES BEFORE THE COMMITTEE FOR CONSIDERATION SEEMS UNCONSCIONABLE.

ON JANUARY 27TH REPRESENTATIVE BILIRAKIS RE-INTRODUCED THIS BILL IN THE 108TH CONGRESS. IT IS H.R. 348. WE ARE DEEPLY GRATEFUL FOR HIS CONTINUED SUPPORT OF OUR DESERVED ENTITLEMENTS. ON MARCH 5, 2003, SENATOR PATTY MURRAY INTRODUCED A SIMILAR BILL, S. 517.

LET ME BE CLEAR ON WHAT IS AT STAKE. FAILURE TO SUPPORT THESE TWO BILLS MEANS SIMPLY THAT MANY DESERVING FORMER POWS WILL CONTINUE TO BE LEFT OUT. IT ALSO MEANS THAT THEIR FUTURE WIDOWS WILL NOT BE ENTITLED TO DIC BENEFITS.

WE ARE AWARE THAT OTHER BILLS BENEFICIAL TO POWS OR THEIR SURVIVORS HAVE BEEN INTRODUCED. WE WHOLEHEARTEDLY SUPPORT THEM, PARTICULARLY THE DIC BILLS, H. R. 36 THAT ELIMINATES THE MARRIAGE PENALTY SHOULD A SURVIVING SPOUSE REMARRY AFTER AGE 55 AND H. R. 886 THAT PROVIDES DIC BENEFITS FOR A SPOUSE OF A POW WHO DIED BEFORE SEPTEMBER 30, 1999. WHILE SUCH PROPOSALS ARE NEEDED AND ALWAYS APPRECIATED, THE COMMITTEES FIRST PRIORITY OUGHT TO BE TO HELP POWS LEFT OUT. THE COST OF DOING SO WOULD BE LARGELY OFFSET BY NUMBERS OF POWS CURRENTLY RECEIVING BENEFITS WHO ARE NOW DYING AT A RAPIDLY INCREASING RATE!

IF YOUR COMMITTEES HAVE GENUINE CONCERNS FOR THOSE LEFT OUT, WE WOULD BE DELIGHTED TO WORK WITH YOU — AND SUPPORT YOUR EFFORTS — WE KNOW THE AMERICAN PUBLIC STRONGLY SUPPORTS SUCH ASSISTANCE. MOST ALL VSO ORGANIZATIONS SUPPORT OUR CURRENT LEGISLATION.

WE HOPE YOUR COMMITTEES AND EACH MEMBER INDIVIDUALLY WILL SUPPORT LEGISLATION FOR ADDITIONAL PRESUMPTIVES AND DO SO WITHOUT FURTHER DELAY JUST AS YOU HAVE SO EXPEDIENTLY DONE SO FOR VIETNAM AND PERSIAN GULF VETERANS.

IN CLOSING, I WANT TO SAY WE ARE DEEPLY INDEBTED TO EARLIER COMMITTEES THAT DID ACT ON BEHALF OF POWs. THEY DID LISTEN, THEY SAW THE EVIDENCE AND THEY ACTED. WE URGE YOUR COMMITTEES TODAY TO DO THE SAME.

THANK YOU.

ATTACHMENT: LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE REPORT
EX-POW BULLETIN
JANUARY, 2003